

[Bronx Slave Market]

Beliefs and Customs — Folk Stuff

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview [7?]

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Vivian Morris

ADDRESS 225 West 130 St.

DATE December 6, 1938

SUBJECT BRONX SLAVE MARKET

1. Date and time of interview Observation Nov. 30th from 9.40 A. M. to 1.30 P. M.
2. Place of interview 167th St. & Girard Ave. Bronx, New York City
3. Name and address of informant Minnie Marshall, 247 West 132nd St.
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

None

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

None

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6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

Several stores surround this neighborhood slave market, mainly on South side of 5 and 10 cents store, where the Madams shop for domestic necessities etc., including the slave girls and women.

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NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

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Having heard rumors that a "Slave Market" was in existence in the Bronx — according to hearsay, this market was operated by white "Madams" where Negro women slaved for a few cents per day — early one November morning, I decided to confirm such reports by making a personal tour of the neighborhood where the condition was supposed to exist.

While walking down 167th St. and as I reached Girard Ave., I found the object of my search. Here I was confronted by sights and tales of woe which I shall always remember.

There, seated on crates and boxes, were a dejected gathering of Negro women of farious ages and descriptions — youths of seventeen, and elderly women of maybe seventy.

These women were scantily attired — some still wearing summer clothing — and as the

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November wind swept and whistled through them, they ducked their heads and tried to huddle within themselves as they pushed close to the wall.

I joined the group as though in quest of a job. Although properly clothed, I too, suffered from the bitter cold which made me shift from foot to foot. Immediately, my thoughts strayed to these twenty or more unfortunate women who were partly-clothed, some with tennis shoes, cut-out men's shoes, warped women's shoes bearing Wanamaker's seal — the cast-offs of some forgotten "Madam."

A woman with a gold tooth smiled and invited me to share her box. Her face bore cuts over both eyes and the corner of her mouth. She appeared to be as broad as she was tall, but, despite all this, her flat face bore a kindly expression. When she discovered that I was in her category, she became sympathetic and as one woman to another, she began to relate her futile struggle of life from past to present into my receptive ears. She commenced by stating that her name was "Minnie." Minnie was born in the tidewater section of Virginia near Norfolk, a seaport town, in 1908. (She looked forty-five). Her father was a black sailor "brawny of arm and smooth of tongue" -so her mother told her. I interrupted Minnie to question the whereabouts of her father. She stated that, "he had gone down to sea with his ship, so Ma said." She went on to say, "I had been yanked out of school in the third grade at the age of fourteen, in order to take my ailing mother's job at 'Miss Sarah's' — mother died in a few days." As I listened, attentively, I gathered that Minnie had been repeatedly fired from various positions due to lack of experience and youth — not having enough endurance and muscle for fifteen to eighteen hours of strenuous laundry and housework. She decided to take a fling at marriage at the age of sixteen. She married a hard-drinking sailor thrice her age who gave her, for a wedding present, Fifty Dollars, and told her, "Get some puddy clo's fo' you' se'f." Minnie, unaccustomed to such a large amount of money, decided to save it — first having the satisfaction to touch, feel and count. The next night, her husband returned home roaring drunk and demanding money — "Five Dollars" — and when Minnie timidly took the roll from under the pillow and peeled off the requested amount, he attacked her insanely, cutting both her eyes and mouth knocking out her front

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teeth and taking all of the money, stumbled, and disappeared into the night. She never saw him again!

During the next twelve years, Minnie worked steadier, became adjusted to conditions and was now a squat, muscular woman whose endurance was beyond the average, and she could now work unlimited hours without audible protest. At this period, she replaced her front teeth with gold ones. "But the scars would be with me till my dying day," she quoted.

In September, 1938, Minnie having saved Twenty Dollars, decided to migrate to New York. She arrived with about six Dollars and paid four for a room, leaving two, and though, very hungry, was afraid to spend money for food that night. Early next morning, Minnie went to an Employment Agency. "Yes, they had jobs at Forty Dollars, sleep in or out." She almost shouted for joy — that was more money than she could make in Norfolk in two months! But this was New York. The Employment Agent signed Minnie up as a good cook-houseworker, etc., then he proffered her a card, saying: "Four Dollars, please."

Minnie said, her 'shoulders sagged!'

"Fo' Dollas fo' whut?"

"For the job; ya dont think I run this Agency for my health, do you?"

"No, suh, no suh, Ah only got two Dollas 'tween me an de Lawd. Ah clare, Mistuh, ah'll give you de res' fus' week ah woks, hones' Mistuh."

He tore up the slip, saying: "Ya'll pay me when you get paid—

4

That's a hot one — keep your two Dollars, lady!"

Minnie tried agency after agency but the results were the same. They wanted their money in front. She couldn't get day's or part-time work because the agents had special cliques

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to whom these choice jobs went. It was rank folly for any outsider to think of getting one of these jobs. After many days of trying, rent due, money gone, a sympathetic girl in one of the Agencies, told Minnie that, "when she was out of money, she stood on one of the corners in the Bronx, where women came and hired you."

"Next mo'nin' Ah gut up prayin' that de lan lady woudn' heah me and walked de fifty-some blocks to dis place, an' I saw Othah gals standin' heah-so Ah stood wid dem. Soon a fine cah driv up — dere was a lady hol'in' some O'dem eye-glasses yo' hol' in yo' han' an' peepin' at us — dem di'mons on huh finguh's mos' blin' you an' de mo'nin' too!" She pointed our way an' de big black buck chauffeur got out an' 'proached us sayin', 'Come heah.' Ah sed, 'Who — me?'

"He sez, 'yes — ya wanna wuk, don'cha?'

"I walked to the cah an' he says, 'get in'. Ah staht to got in the back but de madam was dere — he in de front — wheah could ah set? "Git in the front. Doan tank ya'll set in de madam's lap, dees ya?' De gals laughed.

"'Vill you get in, goil?' sed de madam, 'hi got no time for dot foolishness.' The gals laffed.

"'Hi pay twanty-five sants an hour — is dot alright mit you?'

"Ah said: 'Yas'm.' After all, I was 'bout to be put out do's.

"De Drivuh driv down Walton Avenue a ways an' stop 'fo' a fine 'partment house. De madam tuck me up to huh 'partment an' ah 'clare, dese seben rooms she pint out to me ain' fittin' fo' hawgs to live in. Dey was sume doity!

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“She say: 'Listen, golly. Hi vant you to do a gutt [chobe?] h'im having company tomorrow. Hi vill tip you fine. Your time begins now. You vill be pait by dot clock. See — nine-forty five?”

“Dat dam' clock sed de same time dat she said, so Ah tho't mah clock was wrong. (All the gals carry clocks.) Ah sta't wukkin' an' wo'n mo'n fifteen minutes begin, when dot ol' heiffer was givin' orders, “do dis an' do dat.” She 'zasperate me so dat ah co'd choke huh tongue out'n huh but ah beared huh. 'Bout six o'clock, ah tol' huh, 'Miss Gol' blatt, ah's thru.”

“She sehs, 'bout time,' Den she sta'ts reachin' in con'-ahs fo' dust — feelin' huh husban's shoit colla's to see ef 'nough sta'ch in dem — lookin at de flo' mos' touchin' nit wit' huh big nose, nea' sighted se'f. Den she smile and seh, 'Vas de lunch gut?' (dat ole slop-fish, two days ole!)

“Ah said: 'reck'n so!”

“Den she gi' me mah money — dollar, eighty-seben cent.

“Ah sehs: 'Miss Gol' blatt, ain' you' miscalc'late? Ah wukked eight hours — tu'k fifteen minutes fo' lunch?’

“‘Listen' dear goil, Hi neffer cheat hany body. You voiked seven hours — fifteen minutes, vich giffs you vun dollar — heighty-two sants, hand hi took hout fife sants for bringink you here, vich makes hi should giff you van eighty seven, bud hi giff you, per agreement, a nize fat tip of tan sants — van eighty sefen. Goodby!’

“ah was mad den, but when ah got out an' foun' dat it wus eight o'clock and dat ole heifer done cheat me out of two hours, ah cou'd a kilt huh. Well, ah at leas' had sumf'n fo' my lan'lady.

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Here, Minnie paused awhile and squinted her tired eyes, say—"Ah hates the people ah Wukks for. Dey's mean, 'ceitful, an' ain' hones'; but whut ah'm gonna do? Ah got to live — got to hab a place 6 to steh —' dough my lan'lady seys ah gotta bring huh sumf'n or ah can' stay dere tonight..Wait!"

A weazened little woman, with aquiline nose, thick glasses, and three big diamonds which seemed to laugh at the prominent-veined hands which they were on passed down the line, critically looking at the girls. When she reached Minnie, she stopped peering: "Can you do woik-hart voik? Can you vash windows from de houtside?"

"Ah c'n do anything — wash windows, anywhere." Time was passing, she had to get a job or be put out.

"Twenty-five sants an hour?"

"No ma'am; thirty-five."

"I can get the youngk goils for fifteen sants, and the old vimmen for tan sants." She motioned toward the others who were eagerly crowding around.

"Yas'm; ah' Ilgo," said a frog-eyed, speckle-faced; yellow gal, idiotically smiling.

"Me. too," chimed a toothless old hag with gnarled hands — a memento of some days in Dixie.

"Seel!" said the woman.

"But dey caint do de wokk Ah kin do," rebutted Minnie defiantly.

"Thirty-sants", said the bargain-hunter, with an air of finality.

"Le's go," said Minnie flashing me a gold-toothed smile.

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“See y’u latuh, honey. Ta’k to some o’ de othah gals ‘bout dere troubles. Sho’ he’p yo’ wile yo’ time ‘way.

So long, “Minnie,”

“Hope yo’ don’ meet no heifer lak’ ah did on mah fus’ job,” she added.

I waved goodbye to the “slave” for a day, as she plodded [???